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Preserving HBCUs for Future Generations

Many people wonder why Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are important and relevant in today's society. Historically, HBCUs were virtually the only institutions of higher learning available to African Americans students. During a time when there were few facilities that welcomed large gatherings of African Americans, HBCUs also provided buildings for this purpose. Thus, historically, HBCUs were cornerstones and focal points of their community. For these reasons, HBCUs are important resources in depicting the history of black Americans throughout much of the 19th and 20th centuries.

Active preservation efforts directed at HBCUs date back at least to 1986, when Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee received a Congressional appropriation of $161,000 for much needed repairs on Jubilee Hall, a National Historic Landmark. This small appropriation set into motion programs that have garnered tremendous support and attention and was the first of its kind given to a historically black college to aid in the preservation of one of its historical resources. Since then upwards of $10,000,000 has been appropriated to various HBCUs for preservation efforts.

Funds have been distributed through two programs. The first is the Secretary of the Interior's HBCU Preservation Initiative. It grew out of discussions between the Department of the Interior, the United Negro College Fund, and the presidents of colleges and universities worried about the fate of some of their most historic buildings. Several of these buildings were in such a deteriorated state, that if work were not done soon, they would be in danger of collapse. Schools proposed a total of 130 buildings for funding. Eleven were selected and arranged in priority order according to their historic significance, architectural integrity, and level of threat. With funds appropriated from fiscal year 1995 to fiscal year 1999, all of the 11 HBCU buildings selected for this initiative have been funded. The second HBCU program resulted from the guidance of Congressman James Clyburn of South Carolina. Twelve more schools became eligible for funding assistance through the Omnibus Parks Bill of 1996. For both programs, amounts awarded required a 50 percent non-federal match by the school.

Obtaining appropriations and raising the match were only the beginning of the challenge. When funded schools were able to match their grant, they then had serious preservation nightmares associated with each building. One of the major problems to be confronted was assault from environmental contaminants. The most deadly of these contaminants are pigeon droppings, which can cause a disease known as histoplasmosis. The organism that causes this disease grows in soil that has been enriched with bat or pigeon droppings. It produces spores that can

The McCoy Administration Building at Rust College in Holly Springs, Mississippi, was the subject of a condition assessment study. Photo courtesy National Park Service.

become airborne if disturbed, and inhalation of these spores may cause infection, primarily of the lungs, which can result in death. All vacant HBCU buildings that have received funding are dealing with this problem. The removal of these droppings is an expensive process and must be done according to EPA regulations.

Asbestos is a second preservation nightmare for HBCUs. Asbestos fibers can cause serious health problems if inhaled because they disrupt the normal functioning of the lungs. Again, all funded HBCU buildings have this problem, and it must be addressed prior to any rehabilitation work occurring. Like the removal of pigeon droppings, asbestos abatement is an expensive process and must be done according to EPA regulations.

Perhaps the most difficult preservation nightmare to deal with is termites, and particularly the Formosan termite. This menace, which originated in south China, is thought to have arrived in New Orleans in wood crates in the l940s. The Formosan termite is a much more aggressive species than native termites. They bring in everything they need to survive, and are eating through trees, bridges, telephone poles, and entire houses throughout Louisiana, Florida, Texas, Georgia, Mississippi, North and South Carolina, Alabama, and Tennessee, just to name a few states. This termite has threatened about 500 buildings in the City of New Orleans alone. All of the vacant eligible HBCU buildings have termite damage to some degree.

A final hazard is lead paint, a toxic material widely used in the United States on both interiors and exteriors. If a building has attained an age of 50 years, this means that it contains some lead paint. All of the buildings in the HBCU programs are over 50 years old and lead paint has been detected in each of them. When it deteriorates, lead paint produces paint chips and lead-laden dust particles that are a known heath hazard. Lead paint abatement is expensive and closely regulated by EPA, and there are also worker safety standards established by OSHA.

Even with all these nightmares, the HBCU program reaps significant benefits. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, Fisk University fell on hard times and for a second time in its existence, came close to closing. It was difficult to convince potential donors and grantors to provide funding for an institution whose future was in doubt. The emergency repair work done to Jubilee Hall was the first visible and positive signal that Fisk was beginning to address campus problems. With the completion of the campus preservation project, support for Fisk has improved. Enrollment has shown a steady increase and donors are helping to increase the endowment. In addition, alumni are again willing to contribute generously. As surroundings have improved, so have student and faculty attitudes about Fisk and its future.

Today, all HBCUs with preserved historic buildings enjoy a renewed sense of tradition and appreciation for their long and distinguished records. The schools are benefiting from a greater understanding of their cultural history. While preservation efforts cannot be credited solely for the rejuvenation of these institutions, they certainly were at the heart of the preservation initiatives. Students can now pay greater attention to academic pursuits without being distracted by the decay of their school buildings and cultural heritage.

Readers should be mindful of the evolving role of HBCUs in American life. While they still serve a student body that is predominantly African American, the enrollment in many of these schools are much more diverse. HBCUs enroll white, Asian, and Hispanic students in greater numbers. They are places where their small size allows all students to get to know each other, not as stereotypes but as real people with shared interests. The student bodies of HBCUs increasingly reflect the multicultural demographics of the 21st century. That is why the preservation of HBCUs represents the preservation not just of African American heritage, but of our national heritage.

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